a flicker of hope by Brokenmachine

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Summary:

When Max joined the little party, she didn't realise there was a lot more to each person than met the eye.

or, five things Max learned about her new friends, and one new thing they learned about her.

a flicker of hope

Author's Note:

> Just a quick warning, quite a lot of triggering matter in the text down below. Read the tags to see what to watch out for if you have triggers.

1. Mike

The door opened and Mike peered out. His eyes locked on her and he blinked. "Hey."

"Uh, hi." Max didn't really know where to start, being on his doorstep at quarter to nine on a Wednesday. The wind blew her hair in her face and she pushed it away. "Um, it's getting dark," understatement. She could hardly see her hand in front of her face, "and Billy's picking me up in ten minutes at the end of your street. Can I wait here?"

Mike glanced behind him. He looked stressed, she could see, and now she listened she could hear vague sounds of shouting.

"I can wait in the street if you want. It's not for long, I—"

"No, it's fine," he interrupted her. Despite the fact he had welcomed her to the Party a few weeks ago there was still some slight tension between them but she tried to overlook it. The skin around his eyes were tight. "Come in, we'll go up to my room."

"Thanks," Max stepped inside when he opened the door, stopping at the clean floor. "Should I take my shoes off?"

More shouting came louder from the living room and the sound of something being thrown. Max flinched on instinct and Mike's expression softened slightly. "No, it's fine, come on," he grabbed her hand and pulled her up the stairs. She got a view of Mrs. Wheeler with tears streaming down her face as she shrieked something before Mike pulled her out of sight.

"Are your parents okay?" she asked. He let go of her hand to open his door.

"Yeah, they're fine, just fighting a lot."

Max let her face drop into a frown but didn't push it any more at his clipped tone. She followed him in and felt her eyes land on the little girl in his bed. Holly was curled up under the covers, clutching a teddy and staring into space. Mike headed over to her immediately.

She looked up, sleepy, and reached for Mike, hands grabbing his tshirt. "Are they still fighting, Mikey?"

"Only a little, Hozzy," he leaned down into her little embrace and kissed her forehead. "It'll be okay."

"Mm'kay," she murmured, eyes shutting. He drew back and sat down beside her. Max sat down uncomfortably on his desk chair. "Love you."

"Love you too, Holly. Try sleep," he watched her fall asleep with shattered eyes and then looked up at Max almost accidentally, the emotions on his face so raw and wild she almost flinched back. He schooled them quickly, his face smoothing out with a practiced ease that made her stomach twist with uncertainty.

"Sorry. This," he waved his hand at the door, "makes her upset. Her room's right above the living room, so she finds it hard to sleep."

"It's okay," Max watched with amazement and slight envy as Mike curled up behind Holly, slipping his arm over her waist. He suddenly looked very tired and very young.

Billy had never done that for her when it was her mom and stepdad fighting—which they did, a lot. He never even glanced her way when her stepdad threatened to beat her like he did to him. What she would give to be in the situation Holly was—afraid, but not alone, a big brother close by to protect her from the monsters. She closed her eyes to get rid of the thought.

"Does it happen a lot?" she asked. Mike's eyes slid open from where they had shut during her thinking. He looked at her with furrowed brows. "The fighting?"

"Oh, uh," he paused. "Yeah. Like all the time."

"Is it bad?"

Mike nodded, rubbing his eyes with his hand. "Yeah."

"I'm sorry," she offered and he made eye contact with her.

"It's okay." A silence filled the room and then the words began to pour out. "It's just so hard because Nancy's out all the time and staying over at Will's every night but I can't because I can't leave Holly by herself—she gets so upset and—"

"Slow down," Max interrupted him, scooting her chair closer and reaching out to pat him on top of the head. Mike shut his eyes almost on instinct. Now she was looking at him, she could see how thin he was, his cheekbones sharp against the pillow and arms like sticks around Holly's waist. There were dark circles under his eyes she had never noticed before. “Tell me, if you want. I’ll listen.”

Mike took a deep breath and opened his eyes, sitting up to lean against the headboard. His fingers played with some of Holly’s long blonde hair as she slept on. “Mom gets drunk all the time and my dad doesn’t give a shit about anything.”

Max bit her lip. She didn’t really know what to say—she had never been very good with words, so she just let him keep talking.

“Like, I used to come home and it would be kind of dysfunctional but not bad. Now it’s just—it’s just, I come home, and no one cares.” His eyes were welling up and Max realised it with a dull kind of horror. She didn’t mean to make him cry. “My parents don’t give a shit about us and—and that’s probably the hardest part.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” she could hardly speak, feeling as if she was fighting against treacle to open her mouth. Her heart thudded in her chest like a hammer to glass. Mike wiped his eyes with his hands and shook his head.

"It's just difficult," he mumbled. "Pretending everything's okay when it's not."

"I understand."

A loud shout came from downstairs and they both flinched. Max caught sight of headlights pulling up outside Mike's window and stood up. “That's my brother. I should go."

"Okay," Mike rubbed his eyes. "See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow, Mike," she turned and left, shutting the door so the fighting didn't wake Holly and slipping quietly passed the living room. The shouting had reached an almost unbearable volume but she grit her teeth, swallowing her guilt at leaving Mike by himself.

As she walked to Billy waiting impatiently in his car she made a vow to help the best she could.

After all, she understood more than almost anyone.

2. Dustin

In the next few weeks the Party began to grow tense. Max didn't know why, and Eleven didn't seem to either, but the boys began to walk on eggshells, lunchtimes filled with quiet conversations rather than the usual loud laughter and shouting. It all seemed to come to a halt over the weekend, where she met up with Lucas and Will and everything was fine.

Then Monday came.

It started off like any other day. Billy drove her to school with scowls and muttered insults but nothing more and she skated to her locker, on the lookout for anyone from the Party. Lucas was already waiting for her there. “Hey,” she greeted him, jumping to a halt and picking up her skateboard. He didn’t answer her, too busy scanning the crowds. “Hello?” she waved a hand in front of his face.

“Oh, hey,” he pressed a kiss to her cheek and she felt it burn them red. “Have you seen Dustin?”

“No, why?” she placed her skateboard in her locker and pulled out her maths book. Ugh.

“Just wondering,” he said, but he lost his focus, staring back out at the corridor. Max rolled her eyes, figuring it was one of his grouchy

days when she heard him swear under his breath. He began to hurry off and she slammed her locker shut, running to catch up with him.

“Hey! Where you going?”

Lucas pointed once and she spotted Dustin trapped beside a locker, head bowed as Troy and his goons circled him like vultures. Max frowned. Normally Dustin would be fighting back, chattering non stop to counter whatever insults they threw at him.

Troy stepped right up to Dustin and snarled something right in his ear. Dustin hardly reacted and Troy swung his fist back, but then—

Mike burst into the group, pushing Troy back into the others.

“GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM HIM.”

He looked angrier than Max had ever seen him, and she had seen him angry a lot. It really was a terrifying sight. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were sharp and burning, hands balled tightly into fists. “You know what day it is!” he shouted, taking a step towards them. Lucas caught up and joined him, leaving Max standing uncertainly at the edge. Troy stumbled back.

“Fuck off, Troy, or I swear to God I’ll beat you into the ground,” Lucas spat, dropping his bag to the floor. A crowd began to gather, humming excitedly at the promise of a fight. Max caught sight of Will rounding the corner, eyes widening at the gathering of students. He began to jog towards them.

She didn’t understand what was happening. Troy picked on them all the time. Why Mike and Lucas looked like they were about to snap his neck and why Dustin looked like he was about to cry seemed to have gone right over her head.

“Of course,” Troy sneered, looking less sure-footed but scrambling for an upper-hand. “Forgot the little retard had feelings. Well—“

There was a crack as Lucas’ fist slammed into Troy’s face, sending him hard to the floor. The crowd shouted and oohed as Mike joined in, sending a hard kick to Troy’s stomach, where he curled up, gasping as blood gushed from an obviously broken nose.

Max's mouth fell open and she caught sight of Dustin and Will disappearing around the corner. She saw a teacher approaching and ran forwards, grabbing their arms. The two boys whipped their heads to look at her and she felt a brief flash of fear at their faces, their eyes narrowed, pupils dilated and mouths hard with fury.

(*billy wore that face right before he punched her*)

"We need to go," she tugged at them, swallowing the bitter taste of panic down. "Right now, come on."

Lucas flared his nostrils but Mike nodded, starting to jog the other way of the teacher. She dragged Lucas along and eventually they were all running, her directing them towards where Dustin and Will had disappeared to.

Mike seemed to realise where they were going to before she did and put on a burst of speed, long legs easily outpacing hers as he disappeared into a class—the AV club room.

She followed Lucas in and stopped at the door, catching her breath.

Dustin was sitting on a chair, being hugged by Mike, his chin resting on his shoulder and eyes shut. Mike was bent over but didn't seem to mind. Tears leaked out of Dustin's eyes, falling down his face. It was the saddest, quietest crying Max had ever seen and her heart fell. She took a step back right into El.

"Oh, sorry," she moved to the side and El breezed right past her, over to Dustin. Max fought the lump in her throat as she watched the others comfort him, unintentionally turning their backs to her.

They don't want you here, the traitorous voice in her mind hissed. *Leave*.

She almost did, but Lucas caught her eye and held out his hand. She went to him, grabbing it with her own two hands and standing half behind him. El had just finished hugging Dustin and was murmuring to him, hands on his shoulders. He was nodding, wiping away his tears.

"Yeah, th-thanks, El," he croaked.

“What is wrong?” she asked, stepping back and looking at Mike uncertainly.

Dustin sighed, scrunching his eyes shut and then opened them. He looked exhausted. “My, um… my dad—” he started and then choked up, pressing a hand to his mouth and looking at the ground.

“He passed away three years ago,” Will said quietly. He locked eyes with Max for a moment, soft and serious and she gulped. “It was… was it today?”

“Yeah, it was,” Dustin breathed out, rubbing his eyes. His whole body was shaking and Max moved forwards without even meaning it. She leaned down and hugged him.

What are you doing? Her whole body screamed at her and she tensed, almost drawing back, but then Dustin settled into the hug, his arm squeezing her waist. She felt her shoulder grow damp but didn’t let go.

Maybe this was what it felt like to have friends.

3. Lucas

Max had never had a boyfriend before Lucas. She still wasn’t really sure what it all meant and how to act, but she took comfort in the fact Lucas didn’t seem to have a clue either. They fit each other well most of the time, their sharp edges knocking around for a right fit, sometimes pushing each other too far and lighting an explosion that could stop them speaking for days.

There were other times though, like when she stayed late at his because Billy had a date where Lucas would fall asleep on the couch they were watching TV on, head lolling to her shoulder. His breath would be warm and his hand would be too and Max would think, *he is what’s meant for me.*

She was looking for him at the end of the day since they were supposed to be doing something after school. He hadn’t shown up at their usual meeting place. (His locker.) She had already cornered Dustin who swore innocence, holding his hands up in surrender.

“Has he forgotten?” she shouted after him.

“Of course not,” he called over his shoulder. “Lucas never forgets.”

So Max began to search, even going as far as to check the boys’ toilets. Nothing. Her irritation grew as well as her worry. What if something happened? She shook her head to clear the thought. Nothing would have. He’d probably just gone home. She turned, heading back down the corridor, and Lucas ran right around the corner into her.

“Shit! Sorry,” he murmured, helping her up. Max immediately pushed him away.

“Where’ve you been? I’ve been looking for you for—“ he cut off her shouting with a hand over her mouth and Max bit her tongue immediately, remembering the last time he did that.

“Be quiet,” he whispered, glancing around. Now she could see him up close, she saw he looked really scared. “We need to go out the side door, come on.” Max felt fear begin to rise in her chest and followed him silently out the door. He looked around the side of the building and, evidently seeing no one, started to walk normally.

“So, where do you want to go?” he asked, rubbing the back of his head. Max stared at him.

“Are you kidding? What happened back there?”

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Nothing, I just lost track of time.”

“Bullshit! Tell me what happened.” Max felt her temper begin to slip but reigned it back in as Lucas took a deep breath.

“You know that kid Freddie Pollock? And his friends Carl and Tim?”

“Vaguely,” Max had to think hard to remember their faces, pulling them up from her classes. “Why?”

“They told me in class they were gonna get me at the end of the day. They chased me round school until I hid in a cupboard,” Lucas pulled himself up to sit down on a wall and stared moodily at the leafy

floor. “It’s bullshit.”

“Why did they? They’ve never given you shit before,” Max pulled herself up on to the wall next to him and nudged his shoulder. He shot her an exasperated look and she bristled. “What?”

“They have,” he mumbled, suddenly looking ashamed. “I just haven’t said.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because they’re the racist kids whose Dads were in the KKK,” he grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. It clicked for Max. Lucas carried on anyway. “They have a lot of influence, and if it got out they were chasing one of the few negros around town they could twist it in their favour easily.”

“I’m sorry, Lucas,” she slid her arm through his and he leaned against her a little more. “I think it’s shitty you can’t do anything to stop it. There must be someth—”

“There isn’t,” he interrupted, beginning to play with her fingers. A slight blushed glowed her cheeks but she ignored it. “It’s batshit crazy people think I’m less—or think my family are less than them because we have darker skin.”

It really was, when Max thought about it. Lucas was smarter than most people she knew, and he was never a jerk about it. She told him so and his lips pulled up slightly at the corner.

“Thanks, Maxy.”

“Don’t call me that,” she protested, hitting him. He laughed quietly and she realised it was still on his mind. “Hey, Stalker, you’re worth ten of the people who think you’re not as good as them, okay? They’re close minded dicks, but there’s more things out there than this shitty town.”

He smiled at her, eyes flicking down towards her lips. She leaned forwards and kissed him, aware the problem wasn’t over, that there wasn’t a lot she could do. Still, she poured her feelings into the kiss and he smiled against her lips, drawing away and then pulling her in

for a hug.

Max hugged him back, suddenly highly aware of the tremors running through him, the tight grip he had on the back of her jacket. She suddenly felt terrified for him. Who knows what those boys would have done if they'd found him.

She remembered the stories her mom told her, of African Americans being hung from trees, being thrown to the ground in broad daylight and beat to death. She imagined it happening to Lucas and felt bile rise in the back of her throat.

"I still think you should tell the others," she murmured, pressing a hand to the back of his head. His hair was soft and bristly against her fingers. "Just in case they try anything major."

"Yeah," he practically whispered and she realised he was trying not to cry. A lump rose in her throat and her eyes began to burn.

"It's okay." *It's not.* "I've got you, Lucas."

He gripped her tighter and she didn't let go.

4. Will

Max had never spent one-on-one time with Will before, so when she walked into the AV club and he was the only one there her first instinct was to turn around and walk back out. He looked up and spotted her, mouth turning up in a friendly smile.

She smiled slightly uncomfortably back.

"Hey. Where are the others?" she asked, trying not to sound like a bitch. Will shrugged, turning back to whatever he was doing.

"I don't think they're here. Mike and El are catching up on work they missed with Mr. Clarke, Lucas is off, and I'm not sure where Dustin is."

"Should you be by yourself?" Max asked, and winced as his head jerked up to look at her, eyes pinched in irritation. Damn. She was not making a good impression. "Sorry."

He sighed, shaking his head. “No, it’s okay.” He made an effort to smile again. “Want to sit in here?”

Max chewed her lip and thought it over for a second. She ultimately came to the conclusion that if something happened to Will and it was because she didn’t stay with him, she would be better off dead to the rest of them. “Yeah, sure.”

She plopped down next to him. “What are we doing?”

“Mr. Clarke’s helping the others so I’m just catching up on stuff,” he chewed the end of his pencil. Max glanced down at his paper. An essay.

“Shit, we have English homework?”

“This is from like three weeks ago,” Will laughed. “I’ve just been off school for too long.” Max smiled politely but truthfully didn’t think it was anything to laugh about. She wondered when the past would leave Will alone and let him live like a normal kid.

She pulled out her books from her bag and placed them on the table next to Will. Billy wasn’t going to be showing for a good hour anyway. For a few minutes the only sound was the scraping of pencils on paper and then Will stopped, obviously finished.

“You going?” she asked him as he began to pack his stuff into his bag.

“Nah,” he shook his head, pulling out another book. “I’ll keep you company.” He was kind. Max leaned over.

“What you doing now?”

A light blush rose on Will’s cheeks and Max bit the inside of her cheek, wondering if she’d gone too far. “Sketching.”

Oh? “That’s cool,” she assured him. A small smile grew on his face and he looked up at her. “Can I see any?”

“Yeah,” he sounded very shy all of a sudden and opened the book. Max’s mouth fell open. She grabbed it from him and held it up to her

face.

“Will, this is amazing!” It really was. The wizard was intricately drawn on to the page throwing a fireball forwards to a huge swarm of black shadows. She could see each individual strand of hair flowing out behind him and the fabric of his cloak. “How did you do this?”

“Just practice,” she glanced up and saw he was smiling wide, cheeks red. Her heart thumped with affection and she looked back down.

Underneath, in big block capitals, it said **WILL THE WISE**.

She flipped the page, looking through the rest. The rest of the Party were drawn at some points: Mike sleeping on the couch in his den, Eleven mid nose-wipe, Dustin’s grinning face and Lucas staring off to the side, resting his chin on his hand. Max didn’t expect to see herself and so was shocked to turn the page and see a full-body length sketch of her on her skateboard.

Underneath the words read: **THE ZOOMER (MADMAX)**.

“Sorry,” Will rushed, and she suddenly remembered where she was. He was sitting there anxiously, shoulders hunched and looking down at his lap. “I know it’s weird, it’s just—“

“So good,” she murmured, hardly even hearing him. Will stopped dead.

“What?”

Max traced a finger over the sketch. Her hair was fiery orange pencil marks flowing out behind her, her leg pushing out behind her, a blue blur of denim. She looked up, feeling a real push of gratitude so strong tears burned the back of her eyes and smiled. “Will, it’s amazing. Thank you so much.”

“It’s nothing,” he brushed off, taking the sketchbook back when she handed it to him. He squeezed her hand while he did and put it back down on the table. She turned back to her work, knowing she wouldn’t concentrate but trying nonetheless.

There was silence for a few minutes and she glanced up at Will. He

was staring at her, face oddly pale and brows furrowed slightly.

“Will?” she sat up, frowning at him. If anything was fucking happening to him right now… if he was having a Freaky Moment she would be dead before she could say ‘it wasn’t my fault.’ Will blinked and then took in a shaky breath. He glanced down at his hands and then back up at her.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Max felt anxiety began to stir her chest and turned to face him. Her knee brushed against his when she moved.

“I’m only asking this because I know we aren’t that close—even though you are my friend, I swear, I’m not—“

“Will, it's okay.” Max moved closer and he seemed to deflate slightly. “What is it?”

Will stared at her, throat working and then took in a deep breath. He looked down at his hands and then rushed out in one big breath, “What do you think about queer people?”

Well. That wasn’t what Max was expecting. She frowned and sat back, watching Will carefully. “I know my stepdad thinks they should rot in hell,” she started slowly and saw him pull into himself, shoulders curving. “But I also know my stepdad’s a dick and… well, there’s nothing wrong with loving someone, is there?”

Will glanced up at her, crossing his arms over his chest. “Isn’t there?”

“I don’t think there’s any difference,” she reached her hand out and he put his in it, linking their fingers. She stroked her thumb over the back of his hand. “If a person loves another person, what has it got to do with me? If they want to love then they should be able to.”

Will’s eyes were filled with tears but he was smiling shyly. Max leaned forwards, raising an eyebrow and he blushed, looking down. “I’m…uh.” He stopped, throat bobbing, and then closed his eyes. “I like boys, I think.”

“Okay,” Max shrugged. “That’s okay.”

Will wiped his eyes and smiled wider, finally drawing back and letting go of her hand. “Thanks, Zoomer.”

“Anytime,” she turned back to her homework and pretended not to notice when he started to draw her again.

5. Eleven

When Max woke up, she wasn’t quite sure why she had. She stared at Mike’s den ceiling, aware of Will curled up against her on one side and Lucas spread out on her other. She lifted a hand to rub her eyes and blinked awake a little more.

She felt sleep trying to pull her back under but resisted, something telling her to stay awake. She felt uneasy and unsettled, like something was about to happen that would be bad for all of them.

The feeling came to her sometimes, mostly when Billy took a bad beating and she would listen to him crying in his room at two in the morning. Sometimes she wondered if he would die from his injuries and be found in the morning, and it would be her fault because she never told anyone.

Beside her Will made a little groaning sound, moving his head and lifting his arm, letting it fall down on Max’s shoulder. That woke her fully and slowly she became aware of the dry taste in her throat. Dustin snored from the couch and Mike gave snuffling breaths from the den where him and Eleven had curled up hours ago.

Max stretched, dislodging the two boys on the mattress from herself and sitting up. It was only then she became aware that the mattress was hovering a few inches off the ground. “What the fuck?” she whispered, and across the room Eleven woke with a gasp.

The mattress dropped silently and almost unnoticeably to the floor, not waking the boys. Max watched, unsure as Eleven sat up, Mike’s arm around her falling to her lap. She pressed a hand to her forehead, taking a deep, shaky breath in.

“Eleven?” Max whispered and the girl’s head shot up, fixing eyes on her. “Are you okay? Do you want to come upstairs?”

Eleven wiped the blood from her nose, ignoring her and turned away, lying back down and cuddling into Mike. Max rolled her eyes and got up anyway. The den stayed quiet and still as she tiptoed up the stairs, but out of the corner of her eye Max saw Eleven raise her head to watch her.

She flicked the kitchen lights on and headed to the sink, grabbing a glass from the side and filling it up with water. She leaned against the cabinet and sipped it, shivering a little in the chilly air.

Max didn't know how long she stood there, but the clock ticking had sent her into a kind of daze. She felt safe here in the Wheeler house, the knowledge that no one was around to shout at her or hurt her letting her lower her walls a little.

Well, only a little, as she finally noticed the silhouette in the doorway and jumped, almost dropping the glass. "Shit!" she whispered, turning back to the sink and pouring the rest of the water out.

Eleven stepped forwards, a duvet wrapped over her shoulders and head lowered. Despite the exhaustion in her frame Max was immediately on high alert, tense. Eleven didn't like her for some reason and she didn't trust her not to use her (awesome) powers to snap her neck.

"Um, do you want water?" Max asked, rubbing her arms. Eleven glanced up through her curls and nodded once.

"Yes."

In silence Max turned, filling up the cup she had just drank from and handing it to Eleven. The other girl reached out to take it, but her hands were shaking too much and she almost dropped it.

"Whoa," Max steadied her hands. Now she was actually touching Eleven she could feel the heat radiating from her. It comforted her, reminded her Eleven was just a little girl like herself. "Do you want to step outside?"

Eleven nodded shakily and followed Max to the garden, a fresh burst of shivers shaking her at the chilly air. Max sat down on the porch

and Eleven did too about a metre away, leaning against the rails.

“What happened?” Max worked up the courage to ask. Eleven looked at her, eyes cold and piercing and Max felt herself wilt. She looked away, wondering why she thought Eleven would trust her enough to tell her.

“A nightmare.”

“What?” Max whipped her head around, not sure if she imagined it. Eleven was staring at her hands, avoiding her eyes.

“It was a nightmare.” Finally she looked up, locking eyes with Max. Hers were swimming with tears. “About before.”

“Before, as in the lab?” Max felt a new wave of fear and uncertainty take over her. She didn’t want to overstep her boundaries but her curiosity was hard to ignore.

“Yes.” Eleven fingered the ends of her ponytail, thick curls bouncing around her face. Max wondered briefly what hers looked like, still piled in a stupid bun on top of her head. “About Papa.”

“Papa?”

“Bad man,” Eleven whispered, a tear falling down her cheek. “Very bad man.”

“What did he…” Max stopped, wondering if she would be able to stomach it. “What did he do?”

“Use me,” Eleven’s hands were shaking hard. Max wanted to grab them but stopped herself. “Made me do… bad things. Or I would get in trouble.”

“Trouble how?” Max scooted closer without realising.

“Put me in the dark room,” Eleven mumbled. “Or… do this.” She lifted her top, turning and baring her back to Max who gasped. Long white scars covered the skin, raised and bumpy. Old, raw areas of skin made a patchwork of her, a real life rag doll.

“What is that?” Max whispered, reaching out and touching the skin. It was rough and Eleven tensed, muscle hardening under Max’s finger.

“Hit me with... sharp things. They dropped… burning liquid on me,” she whispered, voice trembling. Acid? Max looked up, about to ask, and saw she was close to crying. Her voice failed.

“I’m… I’m so sorry,” she whispered. Eleven shook her head, dropping her top and pressing a hand over her eyes. Max sat, unsure and hating herself as Eleven started to cry quietly.

The girl had been through so much, Max felt a wave of hate for Hawkins Lab, and *herself* for not giving her a break. The fact Eleven hated her seemed very far away right then as she rubbed the crying girl’s back.

“Still so scared,” Eleven croaked, looking up at Max. She looked it. “Why am I still so scared?”

Tears welled in Max’s eyes. She understood. “I don’t know,” she murmured and felt Eleven slip a hand into hers. She held on tight. “But you don’t need to be. You have Mike, and Dustin, and Lucas and Will. You have the Chief, too. You’re not alone.”

“You, too.”

“What?” Max frowned at Eleven, who blushed, looking at their hands.

“I have you, too.” Eleven looked up and squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry for being mean. I was stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” Max said, feeling very small, but for some reason that made Eleven’s mouth twitch up. “You’re not.” Eleven smiled, finally, her eyelashes sticky and wet but suddenly beautiful.

“Friends?”

“Yeah,” Max smiled, squeezing her hand. “I could do with a girlfriend. The boys are driving me crazy.”

“I feel you, girlfriend,” Eleven said seriously, and then they both burst out laughing.

“I’m glad you got out of that lab, Eleven,” Max told her, and she seemed to find that funnier and collapsed against her side, giggling.

“El,” she said when she calmed down. Max raised an eyebrow and she smiled wider. “You call me El, because we’re friends.”

“Okay, *El*,” Max teased, but had secretly never been more glad in her life.

+1. Max

Her head hurt and her eye throbbed but she ignored them, hunched over on the bath as she tried to regain control of her breathing. She could hear Billy smashing things in her room and sobbed helplessly into her hands.

“THIS IS WHAT YOU GET,” he roared, slamming his hands into the bathroom door. “THIS IS WHAT YOU *DID*.” Max screamed, nerves frayed beyond repair and heart jumping in her chest. She could hardly see from her fear as he continued to beat on the door, shouting. Without realising she backed up into the wall, curling into a ball and crying and crying and *crying*. It felt as if she would die from her terror. Max knew if Billy got through the door he would kill her.

She didn’t know how long she sat there, hyperventilating, but when she calmed herself down to hear over her own thudding heart Billy had gone quiet. She heard the front door slam and didn’t move from her position until she heard his car drive away, engine roaring.

Max stood up shakily and went to the mirror. Her face was covered in blood from the big cut on her forehead and her swollen eye was turning purple. A groan escaped her and before she knew it she was crying again; helpless, heartbroken sobs that echoed around the empty house.

She began to wash her face gently, holding the towel down on the cut that was still bleeding sluggishly. She looked up in the mirror and

took a deep breath. Her whole body was shaking and she was so exhausted but the thought of sleeping in her own house made a thousand ants crawl over her back.

Dashing into her room, she picked up her walkie talkie and pressed down. “L-Lucas? Are you there?”

It took a minute, but Lucas eventually spoke back. “*Yeah, I’m here. Are you okay? Over*.”

Max took a deep breath, trying to control her emotions, but felt something snap as a sob slipped out. “No.” Another deep breath. “Can I… can I come over?”

“*Yeah, Max. What’s happened? Do you need me to come and get you? Over*.”

“No, it’s… it’s okay.” She took a deep breath and opened her window. The drop didn’t look far but her legs buckled underneath her when she dropped out of it. Pulling herself weakly into a standing position, she leaned against the wall as her head pounded with pain. More tears ran down her face and she pressed the walkie talkie again. “Actually…yeah. Get me at the end of my street, please?”

“*On my way. Over and out*.”

Max made her way unsteadily to the end of her street, collapsing to her knees at the street sign. Lucas only lived a few minutes away and so it didn’t take long before she heard the tinkle of a bike bell. She looked up and saw Lucas and Mike speeding towards her on their bikes, El riding double.

“Max!” Lucas jumped off his bike before it even stopped, sending it crashing to the floor, wheels still spinning. He dashed over to her, crouching down in front of her, not caring about the wet grass. “Oh my God, what happened?” His hands fluttered uselessly around her face.

Max couldn’t help it when she felt her face crumple and the tears rose so quick she didn’t realise she was crying until she collapsed bonelessly into Lucas, sobbing. He held her fast, arms tight around

her, mumbling.

“What happened?” Mike was asking. It all seemed to Max like it was happening from very very far away. El crouched down at her side, stroking her hair. Max cried harder.

“I-I don’t know, Billy, maybe?” Lucas pulled back and held her face gently. “Max, do you need to go to the hospital?”

“No,” she mumbled. El was tying her hair back as she spoke. “No, I don’t.” The tears were beginning to stop as the shock took over. A big balloon of numbness filled her chest, stretching and stealing her breath. The shaking intensified as she fell back into Lucas, pressing her sore face against his neck. “Oh my G-God.”

Another pair of arms wrapped around her and she felt El’s hair brushing her cheek. Mike’s arms slid around them from the other side and she smelled the minty smell from his clothes. Max tried to steady herself and then jerked when someone called her name.

“Holy shit, what happened?” They all drew apart a little to see Dustin with Will riding double down the street, eyes wide and worried. Lucas must have called them all, Max thought, warmth rising in her chest. The two boys came running over, the bike joining the pile on the road.

“Billy happened,” El said, quiet fury radiating through her tone. The air hummed with her power.

“How do you know?” Will asked, moving closer to the group crouching together.

“I just do.” She wrapped her arms around Max’s middle, pressing her face into the back of the neck. “I’m so sorry. Should have realised earlier.”

“It’s—it’s okay,” Max managed, wiping her rapidly filling eye, the other too sore to touch. “It’s okay.”

“You’re bleeding,” Dustin said with dismay, reaching out to wipe at her forehead. His finger came away red. “Oh, Max.”

“Does this happen a lot?” Mike said, making eye contact with her. He looked pale. “Has it happened before?”

Max lowered her head, unable to look them in the eye, and noises of distress and sadness came from them all. “I’m so sorry,” someone whispered, maybe El, and then they were all hugging her. It was in the middle of the pile, the centre of the big embrace, that Max finally let go, turning her face back into Lucas and letting all the anger and bitterness that had festered inside of her for years seep out, like pus from an infected wound. She fell apart and they all held her broken pieces together.

Author's Note:

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